

The Comedy of Shakespeare and Molière

BY

PELHAM EDGAR

REPRINTED FROM THE UNIVERSITY MAGAZINE,
APRIL, 1916

PR2971

E34

1916

fol.

p44



National Library
of Canada

Bibliothèque nationale
du Canada

THE COMEDY OF SHAKESPEARE AND MOLIÈRE

I HAVE been re-reading Shakespeare and Molière recently, first for the pleasure of the operation and secondly to satisfy a certain legitimate curiosity of my mind. It was not my desire to weigh one achievement against the other, nor to play the game of pitch and toss with two great reputations. It seemed also too ambitious a thing to strive to get behind and beneath the workings of two such powerful minds, for the creative process must remain a mystery even where it originates; but it seemed to me possible to gain some light even upon that mystery, and legitimate to investigate the divergent aim in art of two nations that intellectually speaking have never yet trod the same path together. Frenchmen accuse us of disrespect for Racine and of indifference to Molière. We retort in kind and deny a sense of poetry to the race that refuses Shakespeare or accepts him grudgingly on Voltaire's terms as a drunken barbarian of genius." Some mutual accommodation is evidently necessary and enough imagination on the reader's or spectator's part to adapt himself to a foreign point of view.

Let us begin our enquiry by a statement of the qualities wherein Shakespeare and Molière resemble one another, and by an examination of the conditions they share in common.

They were both working dramatists and masters in their craft; and if Molière seems the more modern and can now be acted with less retrenchment and alteration it is only because the Shakespearean stage has passed away, and the technique of the Molière theatre is, with few modifications, the technique of the *Théâtre Français* of to-day. The device of the aside and the soliloquy, and the multiplication of incognitos and recognition scenes, are antiquated features in

the stage practice of both authors, and each was hampered, though the Frenchman much more severely, by a stage encumbered with tittering or yawning spectators. But these encumbrances removed, the Molière stage would not markedly differ from a severe *mise-en-scène* of the modern time, whereas the Shakespearean stage, curtainless, unroofed and projecting far into the midst of the standing crowd is an archeological puzzle which scholars have not yet succeeded in fitting together.

Shakespeare and Molière alike experimented widely, and each carried to its perfection the types of comedy that the taste of the day supported. Shakespeare turned his prentice hand to the refurbishing of older plays, working for a time as we suspect in collaboration with more experienced playwrights. Then, his craft mastered, he launched unaided into his dramatic histories, at a time when chronicle plays were still in their height of fashion, and always with his unerring instinct for what the public wanted, he gives them now heroic plays in which he out-Marlowes Marlowe, now woodland comedies in which the wit is daintier than Lyly's and the passion more delicately refined than Greene's, now tragedies of revenge where Kyd's bombast is converted into power, and in the mellow evening of his career comedies again ripe with the distilled wisdom of his life, but touched with the freakishness and fantastic grace that delighted the theatre-goers of the day. I confess that I am sceptical of the theory which connects Shakespeare's comedies and tragedies with certain unspecified events of his private life. He wrote comedies of course when he was gay, and tragedies when the serious realities of life thronged in upon his mind, but either mood I maintain was at his command when the occasion demanded it. Is not the same thing true of Molière, and is it more discreditable to him that he should have written at times with reference to the play-bills of the rival theatre of the Hôtel de Bourgogne than to Shakespeare that he kept a worldly eye on the box-office receipts of the Globe? A dramatist is not a lyric poet who sings his private joys and

sorrows, and we must never forget the social basis on which the theatre is reared.

Shakespeare, I have said, created no new types, but so enlarged and enhanced the old ones that they seemed like new creations. Molière is variously credited with having originated the comedy of character and the comedy of manners. In reality, like Shakespeare, he was the child of his age; like Shakespeare he found the instrument ready fashioned to his hands; and like Shakespeare he could elicit new harmonies from the old frayed strings. The *comédie-ballet* which amounts to a full quarter of Molière's dramatic work is asserted to have been of his invention, but the type is only an amusing amalgam of farce and dancing, organized with the aid of Lulli to pleasure a king whose tastes were not severely intellectual. Molière's originality lay in his point of view, in a certain trick of observation of which he had the secret, and in his knowledge of the scope and limitations of the dramatic form he cultivated.

In France, as in England, comedy had a learned and a popular origin. Shakespeare and Molière paid off early their debt to Plautus and Terence. Neither of them, and this is especially true of Molière, ever freed himself from his debt to farce of the most popular and boisterous kind. In a few grave plays of his middle age, Molière dispenses with the thwackings and preposterous situations that the type demands, but even the "Misanthrope" and "Tartuffe" have their moments of calculated buffoonery, and the later plays again carry comedy to the utmost verge of the burlesque.

"Farce," as an acute critic, Lanson, has said, "is logically and historically the source of Molière's comedy." That Shakespeare is less indebted to the same source is partly a matter of temperament and partly of literary history. Farce is indigenous to France and has a natural evolution out of the earlier *fabliau* which was wholly democratic, gay and scurrilous. With us it is an imported product, and dates from Heywood only, who was almost by date an Elizabethan. Our fools and clowns have an earlier derivation—though a

disputed one—from the vices of the moralities, and comic invention was busily at work in the Wakefield miracles of still earlier date; but organized farce was slow to appear, and Shakespeare, the barbarian, used its methods more discreetly than did the favourite poet of the most refined court of Europe.

Shakespeare and Molière as comic poets cannot be brought into comparison throughout the whole range of their work, because the coasts of tragedy are but skirted by Molière, whereas Shakespeare's complete comic range can be estimated only if one takes his tragedies as well as his comedies proper into account. A few of Molière's more serious comedies allow, however, of a partial comparison, and we recognize that each poet has constant recourse to comedy for the purpose of relieving a tense situation. It is to be noted, however, that Shakespeare achieves more than this in such a creation as that of Lear's sweet mad fool. Here the vast load of sorrow is not discharged and precipitated into merriment, but grief casts a deeper shadow from the encounter of these two disordered minds. It is these blessed incongruities that perplex French comment on Shakespeare. Where we find him almost uncannily superhuman in his powerful fusion of opposites, they find him only disconcertingly irregular. Comic relief is resorted to therefore by both dramatists alike, but in Shakespeare the contrast is sharper, and the penetration into mood and motive is subtle beyond the measure even of Molière's art.

In their choice and handling of themes, despite the incontinent borrowings of both poets, their practice was markedly dissimilar. Each uses at his will and inclination the traditional comic types of the stage that had descended through the Italian comedy of masks from an original Latin source. Of the two Molière is the more conventional, but the preference of both is for characters that they have studied in their living environment. The main point of difference to be noted is that Shakespeare often manipulates, but rarely invents a plot; whereas Molière is greatly less in the debt

of chroniclers and novelists, but is much quicker than Shakespeare to transplant a whole scene from another dramatist into one of his own plays. "I take my good things where I find them," was his candid and commendable remark. Their conception of comedy lies at the bottom of the difference. They both were naturally always on the alert for a good subject to work upon. Shakespeare was primarily attracted by a story which presented dramatic possibilities. The theme kindled in his mind, and he could always depend upon the fertility of his invention to provide him with characters that should make the story more vital and significant than his bare original. Molière was at heart a passionate reformer who desired to chastise morals by laughter, and by ridicule to cleanse the world of folly. The story for him was of small account; the social bearings of the situation and its comic possibilities were alone important. Some half-dozen of his plays ring the changes on the time-worn situation of the doting old man in love with the ward who loves the youth who is abetted by his scheming valet.

I have outlined some of the characteristic features of the two writers in order to show that even where they most resemble there is more divergence than likeness. Sainte-Beuve has traced an affinity between them inasmuch as both writers have command of a large and liberal language which they use with careless power. His contention is interesting and suggestive in so far as it serves to differentiate their method from that of writers like Racine or Milton whose solicitude for style leaves no line or ultimate syllable unregarded. But beyond the fact that Shakespeare and Molière seemed equally careless of their verbal reputations an Englishman is not likely to discover much in common between the literary methods of these two great writers. A purely stylistic study of Shakespeare yields certainly the richer result. The interval of merit is wider in his work, because we can discover there the extremes of the execrably bad and the unapproachably sublime, and can trace a constant progress from fluent ease to pregnant concentration. Molière

exhibits some minor developments of style, but every modification leads him further from the language of poetry. Though he thought in verse he thought rarely as a poet, and his growing concern was for effectiveness. It is probable that English readers who are reasonably familiar with French miss few of the characteristic virtues of his style. But there are passages in Shakespeare, and many of these his finest passages, so pregnant in their condensation and so subtle in their appeal that their full beauty must escape all but the most competent of foreign readers, and there are passages again that present fewer difficulties to interpretation, and yet the value of which is impaired for those who cannot appreciate the rare distinction that Shakespeare is able to confer even upon a word. Take as an instance this speech of Agamemnon in the "Troilus and Cressida" which I have the more pleasure in quoting not only because it supports my statement but because it brings us heartening counsel in our present difficulties:

Agam.	Princes,
-------	----------

What grief hath set the jaundice on your cheeks?
 The ample proposition that hope makes
 In all designs begun on earth below
 Fails in the promised largeness; checks and disasters
 Grow in the veins of actions highest rear'd,
 As knots, by the conflux of meeting sap,
 Infect the sound pine and divert his grain
 Tortive and errant from his course of growth
 Nor, princes, is it matter new to us
 That we come short of our suppose so far
 That after seven years' siege yet Troy walls stand,
 Sith every action that hath gone before,
 Whereof we have record, trial did draw
 Bias and thwart, not answering the aim,
 And that unbodied figure of the thought
 That gave't surmised shape. Why then, you princes,
 Do you with cheeks abash'd behold our works,
 And call them shames? Which are indeed nought else
 But the protractive trials of great Jove
 To find persistive constancy in men;

The fineness of which metal is not found
 In fortune's love; for then the bold and coward,
 The wise and fool, the artist and unread,
 The hard and soft, seem all affined and kin:
 But, in the wind and tempest of her frown,
 Distinction, with a broad and powerful fan,
 Puffing at all, winnows the light away;
 And what hath mass or matter, by itself
 Lies rich in virtue and unmingled.

The poet and the statesman speak in every line of this speech. Its appeal is singularly forcible to us, but I should despair of converting a foreigner to our opinion. Its value as presenting a situation he would concede and the general proposition advanced would meet with his approval,—as, that large enterprises not seldom defeat our too eager hopes, that we must not therefore blench at a deferred success, but see rather in the delays of fortune and in the strokes of adversity an opportunity to prove our mettle. Victor Hugo with all his boldness in metaphor has not prepared his countrymen for a language where dignity and familiarity, Latin pomp and Saxon simplicity are blended as they are in the opening lines, and the extension of meaning in the word “distinction” as Shakespeare here employs it would scarcely lie within the competence of a foreigner's appreciation. Sainte-Beuve was entitled to speak of Molière's large and liberal use of language, but with diligent search he could have found no passage in the plays of so ample and withal so subtle a phraseology as this speech, selected almost at random from Shakespeare's pages. Matters of state were not within the scope of Molière's philosophy, but even that heroic politician Corneille, grave and distinguished as was his habitual utterance, has given us nothing that both satisfies the mind and releases the imagination so effectively as this.

I can hear my imaginary Frenchman protesting: “But, my dear Monsieur, you have deranged yourself a great deal to prove nothing. I have read your ‘Troilus and Cressida.’ It is not a comedy. It is not anything that I can name.

The speech you quote is not comic, and there is no comparison with Molière whose speeches always govern themselves by their comic intention. It is true I do not understand the speech very well. I get an idea of confused magnificence. You, on the other hand, can understand everything our Molière says. He is like fresh water running, always sparkling, always clear. Is this a merit? Is it a defect? Who will judge? And yet there is more to say. We other Frenchmen are not so displeased with your Shakespeare when he is grand as when he is little. We think that he has not given to comedy its true direction. Comedy is not mere word play or what you call play on words. Repartee soon degenerates into flippancy and ceases to be amusing; and besides that, Monsieur, where all your young people strive to outdo one another in cleverness they lose their character. They are mannikins pulled by a string. It is like your Bernard Shaw who pretends that he is not fond of Shakespeare. With both of them cleverness is a disease." My Frenchman is becoming voluble, but he is convinced that his argument is sound. For reasons of national pride I contest the ground with him, and I do not admit too readily that Molière has the surer grasp of the principles that govern comedy, its critical scope, its befitting situations, its appropriate language. The defence that I set up for the mimic phrase warfare of Shakespeare's comedies was the best I could offer, but it did not placate my good-natured opponent. I pointed out in the first place that repartee is a mere ingredient in Shakespearean comedy, not its essential feature. Frequently it is bad, more frequently it is in itself good, and often it justifies itself by exhibiting a fashion of the time, and even in the mouth of Mercutio and Romeo, or Benedick and Beatrice, an essential trait of character. Might we not go further and venture the surmise that Shakespeare in Biron and Mercutio reveals to us features of his own character? He has given us his Holofernes and Armado, as Molière has given us his Vadius and Trissotin, to point the absurdity of pedantry and affectation, but Biron and Mercutio are

presented to us in so kindly a fashion that we must infer that Shakespeare himself was only too ready to bandy jests and crown a pun with a pun. Here my Frenchman brought down a Molière from the shelves and asked me to read some passages from the "*Critique de l'Ecole des Femmes*." I translate a few speeches that give us Molière's opinions on conversation.

Elise asks her cousin Uranie to spare her the visits of a certain Marquis. "Do you intend to leave him always on my hands, and do you think I can stand his perpetual punnings?"

Uranie.—This language is the fashion, and the court is fond of punning.

Elise.—So much the worse for those who indulge in it, and who torture themselves the whole day to speak this obscure jargon. What a fine thing it is to introduce into your conversations at the Louvre old jokes picked up in the mud of the Maubert market square! That is a nice way for courtiers to jest, and how witty a man is when he says to you: Madame, you are in the Place Royale, and everybody sees you three leagues off from Paris; for everybody looks on you with a favourable eye—(*car chacun vous voit de bon œil*); because Bonneuil is a village three leagues from here. Is that not very gallant and witty? And have not those who invent these clever things reason to be proud of themselves?"—I could not see that this struck home at Shakespeare whose jests are not calculated, but however bad are spontaneous.

In succeeding scenes of the play, Dorante, the sensible marquis, is hard pressed by his opponents in the defence of his favourite Molière. The "*Ecole des Femmes*" had some phrases which shocked the prudish and seemed to be wilfully imported into the play precisely to that end. Dorante has this remark to make. "As far as 'children through the ear' is concerned, that is only amusing by reference to Arnolphe; and the author did not intend it as a witty thing in itself, but only as a phrase that characterizes the man, and depicts

his absurdity all the better since it reproduces a trivial, silly remark of Agnes's as one of the prettiest things imaginable, and one that gives him extraordinary pleasure."—"To write naturally and to reveal character was Molière's sole pre-occupation in comic dialogue" said my imaginary friend with a tone of quiet assurance. "We think on the whole that whether he writes in verse or in prose he has succeeded. Dorante's view will stand whatever test you put it to. You will remember some of Molière's famous phrases that are repeated constantly with a crescendo comic effect. These are not pure artifice. They are what we call 'mots de situation' but they are also 'mots de caractère.' Valère's repeated 'sans dot' is irresistibly funny in itself, but it also throws a flood of light on Harpagon. And so with the 'Le pauvre homme' of 'Tartuffe', the 'Je ne dis pas' of the 'Misanthrope,' and, in a less degree, with the 'Que diable allait-il faire dans cette galère' of the 'Fourberies de Scapin.' "

I was not sorry when my argumentative visitor regretted that he could not finish the friendly debate. As I bowed him over the threshold he said agreeable things about Shakespeare's skill in tragedies, but revealed his French limitations by saying that these tragedies required only the finishing hand of Racine to make them perfect. His parting admonition to me was to decide in my own mind clearly what the object of comedy should be. If its function was to make people laugh, then there was a valid basis of comparison between Shakespeare and Molière. If it was to make them laugh and think, again there was a valid basis of comparison, and, for his part, he was not afraid of any examination of the two poets that should bring to the test the social bearings and ultimate human values of their work.

With our Frenchman for the present out of the way, let us rapidly survey the subject matter of the comedies, and, as we are English readers, my survey of Shakespeare's plays can afford to be brief. I assume the approximate correctness of the accepted chronology. We have first that very clever young man's play, "Love's Labour's Lost,"

which is Shakespeare's "Précieuses Ridicules" with the rôles inverted, and this is followed before he finds his true direction by a literary comedy of situations with farcical episodes, "The Comedy of Errors," his only Plautine imitation and the only comedy till we reach the "Tempest" at the end of his career that pays strict observance to the unities. Shakespeare carries the mystification of disguise beyond the limits of credulity of course, and certainly, with all our charity, to the limits of endurance. But I have seen the play acted and was surprised to find how much absurdity one is willing to take for granted in the hurly-burly of rapid stage action, and how easy it is to surrender one's intellect for two hours' amusement. Molière's "Amphitryon" lends itself to comparison, but this was a work of his maturity and the honours rest with Molière beyond dispute.

"The Two Gentlemen of Verona" is Shakespeare's first romantic comedy, and prefigures the more delightful plays that are to follow. What can it teach us of Shakespeare's method and purpose in comedy? As this is one of the least read and acted of Shakespeare's plays, a brief *résumé* of the action may be permitted. Valentine and Proteus are presented to us as a pair of devoted friends, and so secure in their mutual affection that Valentine can afford to jest with Proteus on his passion for the lady Julia. Valentine, as befits his station in life, is despatched by his father to the Emperor's court at Milan, but he cannot induce the lover friend to accompany him. Some months evidently elapse, when Proteus' father decides that his son also must enjoy the advantage of foreign travel. He leaves Julia with protestations of love hot upon his lips, and arrived in Milan, promptly transfers his passion to Sylvia, who loves and is loved by Valentine. Treachery now makes havoc of love and friendship alike. Through Proteus' machinations, Valentine is banished, and Proteus seeks to win his way into the affections of Sylvia, who properly despises him. His perfidious wooing is witnessed by Julia who has journeyed to Milan in boy's disguise to learn how her lover is faring.

Sylvia's father, the Royal Duke, has determined to marry her to Thurio, a wealthy and brainless lord of the court. To escape him, Sylvia flees under the protection of a loyal knight, Sir Eglamour, and by the fortunate chances that favour a maiden of romance, she is captured by the band of outlaws of which Valentine has recently been appointed captain. For the final curtain, as we would now say, arrive Julia, still in boy's disguise, Proteus, Thurio and the Duke. Valentine, by an act of rare and surely excessive magnanimity, rewards Proteus for his repentance by yielding Sylvia to him, whereupon the unhappy Julia faints and is recognized. In a trice all are made happy. Thurio reveals himself a poltroon, the Duke bestows his daughter on Valentine, and Julia recovers the penitent Proteus. The serving men, Launce and Speed, furnish the fun, but Shakespeare had not yet learned how to make a comic sub-plot support the major situations.

To return to our original question:—What does Shakespeare aim to do in this, his first typical comedy? Was it his purpose, as later it was Molière's, to study a group of characters who in their interplay of speech and action should exhibit the follies and the virtues of contemporary life? Had this been his dominant purpose, he would not have chosen the method of romance nor have removed his characters so far from the ordinary commerce of the world. It was his practice, as we know, to select a story which should win favour by its fantastic grace and waywardness rather than by the rigorously realistic sequence of its events. If this were all that could be said of Shakespeare's comedy, it might explain his vogue in an age that suffered miracles gladly, but it would not justify his reputation to a modern world that has lost the child-like faculty to wonder and admire. But there is more to be said. In the lightest of Shakespeare's comedies, as in the profoundest of his tragedies, we are conscious of the working of a powerful mind. In his comedies he was willing not to explore the troubled depths of human passion. He was content to let his spirit diffuse itself serenely and at

large over the varied play of life. There is no rigid doctrinaire precision in his presentation of his theme, but for all his lack of system, there is no dearth of philosophic reflection when he encounters philosophy by the way. There is a constant fertile blossoming of his mind upon the page, and much though one may detest the German habit of foisting a moral intention upon him at every turn, it remains true that there is a sweet kernel of philosophy in the slightest themes he treats. "The Two Gentlemen of Verona" is neither a successful nor a profound play, and the need of a happy ending leaves the issues in confusion at the close. But in the theme itself, and in casual passages through the play, we find Shakespeare concerned with the same philosophic problem that gives poignancy to the sonnets—the theme of friendship, complicated by treachery in love. We have therefore, even in this play, a story as fantastically conceived as you please which yet reflects the hues of reality.

In the comedies that followed, Shakespeare was to pour out for us more profusely the poetic treasures of his mind, and to reveal to us powers of characterization which the present play allows us only to suspect, as, for example, in the person of Sylvia who has, though in suggestion merely, the contours, the features and the mind of one of Shakespeare's peerless women. The next comedy does not yet give us the complete Shakespearean woman, but it shows a masterly development in some directions. I do not refer to the skilful blending of fairy-lore, classicism, and village democracy, which makes the "A Midsummer Night's Dream" so interesting from the standpoint of mere craftsmanship, but to the heightening of poetic power which the play reveals, and, concerning us still more as students of comedy, to the sympathetic insight which permitted Shakespeare to exhibit to us the unconscious humours of the common people. Of philosophic intention in the play there is perhaps no more than is evinced in Puck's "What fools these mortals be," but the true philosophy—the philosophy of human charity, lies for me in the court dialogue that preludes the entrance of the versatile Bottom and the self-effacing Snout.—(Act V., Sc. I., 71-84)

"Romeo and Juliet" is usually assigned to the same period as the "Midsummer Night's Dream." Mercutio was stamped from the same mint that coined Biron, and the Nurse is compounded of many humours that Shakespeare recombines for us in the elemental characters of later plays. But though she is fashioned of the common stuff of our ordinary humanity, it was a miracle of divination in Shakespeare to create her, and, having created her, to set her unshrinking, unsuspecting coarseness over against the purity of the girl Juliet, and to make of this garrulous blunt-visioned creature her refuge in distress.

French critics classify comedy in three main divisions, the comedy of situation, the comedy of manners, and the comedy of character. The distinction is futile, inasmuch as every good comedy embraces the three characteristics. In so far as it holds good for Shakespeare, "The Comedy of Errors" would be a satisfactory specimen of the comedy of situation, but the romantic comedies would elude the classification, or would be contained within it only because of the poet's willingness to sacrifice character to situation for the sake of a happy ending. "The Merchant of Venice" is Shakespeare's first and most satisfactory experiment in the comedy of character. The Jew Shylock towers pre-eminently above the surrounding figures, and one of the defects of the play as comedy arises from the fact that he is tragically conceived. But the point is in dispute, and we are authoritatively informed that our conception of Shylock as a tragic character arises from our wilful importation into the play of nineteenth century humanitarianism. A more palpable defect is the jarring union of the real with the fantastic which, despite what critics may say to the contrary, are not here fused with the poet's accustomed skill. I have never reconciled myself to the basket scenes, and I find even the pound of flesh unconvincing. Gobbo is an indifferent clown and contributes little to the merriment of the piece. Not until the fierce tension is relieved does Shakespeare touch the springs of sympathetic laughter. He tosses Shylock to the

harsh merriment of the pit, with, as we trust, a reserve in his own mind of compassion for the victim.

Molière, from the standpoint of comedy, Corneille and Racine from that of tragedy would have looked askance at the theme which Shakespeare undertook to develop in his two Henry IVths. There is neither comedy nor tragedy in it. The material is epic, chaotic, lacking the Aristotelian beginning, middle or end. There is no neat moral problem to be solved in the breast of the hero, except that he must cease to be a naughty boy if he is to rule his kingdom as a true and upright prince. Yet Shakespeare has produced from this indiscriminate welter of material two plays that are a treat to the understanding and a delight to the eye. Here I feel that I may play my trump card against my Frenchman, and annihilate him with Falstaff. "Ah," he says, "that is your English humour. You take a tun-bellied and dissolute knight with a copious gift of repartee, who lords it over prostitutes and thieves, and has a prince of the blood royal for his familiar, and you call that fun. I call it merely indecent. We have nothing so gross between Rabelais and Zola, and Molière, who was not afflicted with squeamishness, would have left such a fellow in the stews where he naturally belongs. But suppose we let the obscenity pass, what conceivable relation have Falstaff and his crew to the great events of English history which Shakespeare has undertaken to reveal?" This onslaught upon Falstaff took me by surprise, and I felt that I could only affirm but not prove the statement that Falstaff is one of the greatest creations in the humorous literature of the world. That a Frenchman should assume an air of injured innocence was particularly annoying, and I said that with a person who held that art must pick her dainty footsteps through a muddy world there could be no argument. As to the reasons for Falstaff's existence, I said that he was created out of the fertility of Shakespeare's brain to eke out the poverty of his dramatic material. Shakespeare may have been innocent of any deep design in providing the characters of the underworld over whom Falstaff

presided, but remembering Macbeth's porter at the gate, and the peasant clown in "Antony and Cleopatra," I am pleased to think that Shakespeare is frequently profound when we think him only profane. If we have suffered a grievous loss, the newsboys still cry out and the carts rattle by in the streets. Macbeth may have committed murder or Cleopatra have meditated self-murder, the world is still insistent, the wheels of life still move on. And so in this play the progress of high affairs of state and the happenings of the underworld present a philosophic contrast that justifies their juxtaposition. A simpler apology for Falstaff is that he serves to exhibit the human weakness of the prince of which his royal father so pathetically complained. "Yes," said my friend, "and a pretty piece of stage repentance at the end it was, for your model prince to signalize his sudden conversion to virtue by heaping public contumely on the head of the man whose vices he had abetted and whose humorous antics had been only an agreeable form of flattery to his own degraded tastes. No, I do not much care for your great national hero, Prince Hal, the model of all the practical virtues of your race, and I do not pretend to understand your Falstaff, who is a lovable monster for all his faults." "For that concession, at least, receive my thanks," I said. "But here," he continued, "is another matter that a puzzled foreigner fails to understand. Falstaff is a knave in the two Henries, but a consistent knave and a lovable knave if you will, though his sovereign flouts him so perfidiously in the end. Can it be that Shakespeare, who appeared to treat his vices so sympathetically, is after all a man himself of common mind with the staid English notion of virtue, or else how can you explain the Falstaff of the 'Merry Wives,' who is soused in the river with the dirty linen, who is beaten out of the house as a witch, and pinched black and blue by pseudo-fairies? Are your poet's charities after all narrowly circumscribed? Is his psychology at fault? And why does this witty, masterly babble of green fields when he comes to die?" The conversation convinced me that there are

certain parts of Shakespeare that we must cherish as a national possession, unappreciated and unshared by foreigners. "The Merry Wives," I replied, "was a play of command, and Falstaff in love could be the subject only of the broadest farce. As for the green fields, the text is corrupt and you are at liberty to think that he was asking for a cup of sack. On the whole, you are singularly unfair to Falstaff. You do not seem to recognize the creative energy which went to his making, and you do not appreciate Shakespeare's dramatic habit of envisaging life through the minds of widely divergent characters. The Falstaffian view of life exists, and it demanded to be presented. Shakespeare has immortalized a point of view. What else have you to say?" "Nothing that you will agree with, I fear. I merely remark that Shadow and Silence are more genuine comedy characters than this wonderful Falstaff, and when I explain why, you will better understand our differences of opinion. Take that scene before Justice Shallow's house in the second part. There is nothing in Molière that equals it for pure comedy, and even the entrance of Falstaff does not rob it of its character. Shallow and Silence with their earnest truisms, and Mouldy, Shadow, Wart, Feeble and Bulcalf with their undisguised reluctance to enlist in Falstaff's ragged regiment are of the very essence of the vulgar comic, because they are so earnest, because they are so undisguised, because, in short, they do not know themselves to be comic. Why I say that Falstaff's entrance does not spoil the scene is because it happens here to be his humour to squeeze their absurdities to the last drop." "Now," I said, "I see the point of our difference, and I think that I can justify Falstaff while still admitting the justness of your general contention. Your objection to Falstaff is that he is self-conscious, and that he is always master of the situations in which he finds himself, and which he for the most part creates with the genuine play maker's instinct he possesses. He is that rare thing in literature, and provokingly rare in the literature of your logic-ridden race—a humourist. You

can understand his character on no other terms. He is not a paragon of virtue surely, but he is more philosopher than libertine, and a philosopher of the humorous kind who relishes the diverting vanities of life, and whose humour precipitates him repeatedly into situations of his own contriving in order that his fertile wit may extricate him."

The debate ended with complete satisfaction to each disputant.

Shakespeare's comedy up to this point is kindly rather than satiric, and "As You Like It" that follows is his sunniest pastoral. "Much Ado" has no new features that need detain us, but "Twelfth Night," beneath its surface merriment, develops a vein of critical satire that makes this play conform more nearly than any previously considered to the Molièresque idea of comedy. It has more poetry, of course, though also it must be admitted more drunkenness than Molière gives warrant for. But Maria, with her pertness and contriving faculty, is a serving-woman after Molière's heart, and Shakespeare's cutting exposure of Malvolio's unconscious absurdities, and his more kindly healing of the sentimentalities of the Duke and Olivia are again in the spirit of the best French comedy. The two sombre comedies, "All's Well that Ends Well" and "Measure for Measure," carry us on to the final romantic group. In "The Tempest" Prospero's magic staff is buried fathoms deep in earth.

* * * * *

Of Molière's life and of the conditions that shaped his career I can give but the bare essentials. He was born in 1621 or 1622 in Paris, the son of a prosperous upholsterer, Poquelin by name, who held a court appointment which it was his later ambition to hand down to his son. The boy had a good education,—a much sounder one than Shakespeare enjoyed,—under the Jesuits at the fashionable Collège de Clermont. Scarcely issued thence he attached himself to Madeleine Béjart's newly formed theatrical company, the

Illustre Théâtre, and with this company his fortunes were associated until his death. Despite the resounding name by which it proclaimed itself, the company failed in three struggling years to establish itself in Paris. They packed up their meagre belongings and wandered at large through France for the next twelve years.

This is the only obscure part of Molière's life, but surmise may render a very satisfactory tale of Molière's activities in the interval and of the influences to which his art was subjected.

The *Illustre Théâtre* left Paris with a flimsy repertory of second-rate tragi-comedies. With no designs upon literary fame, Molière undertook to supply the deficiency, and his great career had therefore the same initial practical impulse that urged Shakespeare into authorship. We can clearly see him at work republishing old plays, recasting the situations and moulding the dialogue to please his country audiences. He discovered in himself a vein of comedy, but it probably required repeated failures to convince him that he could shine neither as tragic actor nor as tragic poet. The influences he encountered were roughly three. The Court's Spanish connexion had popularized the extravagant romantic drama of Spain, and this infection doubtless spread from Paris into the provinces. Molière's art, fortunately, almost escaped this contagion. "Don Garcie de Navarre" at a later time was his one Parisian failure. The "Don Juan" has nothing Spanish save the title, and a certain freedom of movement that distinguishes this work from his other masterpieces. It is more important for us to realize the immense vogue of the native farces which had temporarily died down in Paris owing to the pressure of Corneille's genius, but which still prevailed unchecked in the provinces. It was by his appeal to this dormant love of farce that Molière won his way into the hearts of his Parisian audience, and the twelve years of apprenticeship were therefore not wasted that taught him the vitality of this unaristocratic form of drama. The third influence, and scarcely less potent upon Molière than that

of farce, proceeded from the Italian comedy of masks. Whatever conventionality of type an English spectator discerns in Molière's comedy derives from this source. In the early plays the conventionality is most marked, but with the substitution of Sganarelle for Mascarille, Molière develops a broader and more naturalistic method of handling his characters. The new comedy is usually supposed to date from the "*Précieuses Ridicules*," but Brunetière notes its clear emergence in the "*Ecole des Femmes*," which followed three years later in 1662, and created the first of the violent controversies which were destined to mark Molière's subsequent career. His brilliant rejoinder in the "*Critique de l'Ecole des Femmes*," and the "*Impromptu de Versailles*" should be carefully studied by all who desire to understand Molière's method and practice in comedy. A group of masterpieces also falls within this period,—the "*Tartuffe*," a study in religious hypocrisy, the "*Don Juan*," a study in aristocratic profligacy, and "*Le Misanthrope*." Of this last named play I propose to make a brief analysis.

The "*Misanthrope*" is a work of quite extraordinary power and subtlety, but it cannot be said to be characteristic of Molière's manner. It is like no other play that he has written, yet it seems no less inevitable in his work than "*Hamlet*" was in the work of Shakespeare; and as "*Hamlet*" establishes the unapproachable limits of intellectual tragedy, so the "*Misanthrope*" seems to set an impassable boundary to intellectual comedy. The fable is surely the slightest that ever supported a great creation, and its very bareness instructs us that we must find our satisfaction for once, at least, in characters who exhibit themselves in thought rather than in action.

The story, therefore, need not detain us long. Alceste the Misanthrope is in love with Célimène, the coquette. The prude Arsinoë, wishing to win him over, poisons his mind against Célimène by giving him a letter which the reckless young widow had written to one of her many admirers. In the final scene these admirers are brought together in

Célimène's presence, where they discover, again through the medium of Célimène's indiscreet correspondence, how each in turn has been the target for her sarcastic wit. Alceste storms at her, but gives her a final chance to renounce the world and go out into the desert with him. Célimène refuses, and that is the play so far, at least, as the action is concerned. An ambitious dramatist of to-day would as soon think of submitting to Klaw and Erlanger the scenario of the "Winter's Tale."

An analysis, act by act, would introduce a few additional characters, but would not greatly enlarge the scope of the action. Whence, then, it may be asked, does the play derive its value, and what is its comic motive, if it be a comedy? Its value, we may reply, resides partly in the craftsmanship which, some carelessness apart, exhibits Molière's purely literary power in its fullest development, but chiefly in the graphic manner in which a whole social group is exhibited to us, and in the subtlety wherewith the impulses that control and the ideas that govern that society are presented. Its comedy motive has been a matter of dispute, and we must admit that Molière, usually so broad and boisterous in his comic situations, and never more boisterous than when the action threatened to become serious, has here allowed the comedy to rest almost wholly in the idea, and has made his appeal, in Meredith's phrase, to the "laughter of the mind."

The design of the play is as spacious as its action is restricted. It was Molière's purpose to set upon the stage a group of characters who in a five-act conversation should lay bare the principles from which polite society in the modern world derives its mandate. The "Misanthrope" has suffered the fate of all good plays—"Brand," "Peer Gynt," "The Doll's House," "Hamlet"—that embody a profound conception of life: it has been subjected to much and grievous misinterpretation. Let us not join the blunderers and conclude that the writer is venting a private grievance in this wise play, that he has eternalized his wife's indiscretions in the waywardness of the witty Célimène, or that Molière himself

speaks in the embittered accents of Alceste or in the accommodating speech of the comfortable Philinte. He is at once all and none of the characters of his own making, for he chose them in order to illustrate in all its diversity his conception of society, the submission that it may exact from its members, and the weakness its peculiar constitution involves. For society, though it be a growth in nature, still seems to be a growth away from nature, a human law imposed upon our wilder instincts, a self-forged fetter to which our freedom consents. What makes this play, then, so interesting for those who seek to explore the poet's mind, and what makes it so baffling for those who misread his meaning, is the fact that Molière in a series of striking plays had constituted himself the champion of Nature, and now he gives us a play which deserves the name of comedy only in so far as Alceste, the natural man, is to be considered as a comic, almost, one may say, as a ridiculous figure. It is obvious that if Molière desired to demolish the convention of society, Alceste must be regarded as a wholly sympathetic figure, and the comedy vanishes. Rousseau, whose sentimental misanthropy obscured his comic perceptions, at least did not fall into this error,—perhaps even he leaned to the other extreme in asserting that the atrabilious lover with the green ribbons was created by Molière in order to make sincerity ridiculous. If this is an error, it at least saves the comedy, and is surely more venial than that narrow opinion which ascribes to Molière the intention of contrasting the disinterested virtue of Alceste with the perverse wickedness of Célimène. It has also more to commend it than the pedantic interpretation which converts Philinte, that eminently safe and accommodating person, into a type of XIX century *raisonneur* in whose carefully fashioned speeches the personal views of the author are revealed.

The "Misanthrope," despite the crisp clearness of its individual speeches, is by no means an easy play. It has the fascinating perplexity of every great work that deals profoundly with ideas, and it would be presumptuous

to attempt to set forth its meaning. It is permissible, however, to give one's opinions for what they are worth, and I can satisfy myself concerning Molière's intentions in this particular play only when I take into account his conception of the function of comedy as it may be derived from a consideration of his work at large. Comedy is at once the index and the corrector of our civilization, the index because in a rude society comedy is impossible, and the corrector because its watchful eye is always swift to detect the absurdities which are born of our too conscious striving after refinement. Now Molière as the servant of comedy could never permit the triumph of anti-social opinions, while at the same time he can allow himself the licence, still in the service of comedy, to deal out criticism with an unsparing hand at the expense of those who shelter themselves behind the conventions of the social order. Célimène, the wayward child of convention, does not escape his shafts. But her rippling wit redeems her, and the comic spirit points her judgements upon the men and women whom she has attracted into her sphere. To Arsinoë are dealt out the sharper blows her prudish malice deserves, and the marquises as usual are permitted to make themselves delightfully ridiculous. We remember with peculiar pleasure the great hulking viscount whom Célimène had watched for three quarters of an hour spitting into a pond to make circles. In the majority of his plays Molière reserves some character as a refuge for common sense. In this play that refuge is not furnished by Philinte whose philosophical concessions to the artifices of society savour of comic excess, but by Eliante who has the clear-sightedness of Célimène unobscured by the egotism which dims the else perfect vision of her fascinating cousin.

* * * * *

Comedy is a form of literature so national that only a dispassionate outsider could pronounce judgement on two such contrasted systems as we have been considering. In default

of such an unprejudiced observer let us divest ourselves so far as we may of our prepossessions in Shakespeare's favour, and examine the two comedies on their merits. Shakespeare, it may be urged, holds this advantage over Molière, that he has effected a combination of poetry and realism that gives to his comedy a two-fold appeal. The ready reply of the Moliérist would be that Molière designedly never allows himself like Shakespeare to be seduced by poetry from his real business, which was to present the world of living men and women under their comic aspect. Shakespeare reaches beauty at the cost of truth. In tragedy his characters are unswervingly true to the law of their being, but in his comedy we are in the region of fantastic surprises where the very illogicality of events is an element in the pleasure we experience. Shakespeare obviously looked upon comedy as a relaxation from the tension of his severer labours, and we as readers or spectators seem to share in the joy of this relaxation. Molière, too, has his moments of apparent abandonment, but his comedy is more significant than Shakespeare's. His wildest vagaries are logically controlled, and are in systematic relation to the general scheme of the action. Shakespeare it is true in his best constructed plays recognized the needs of connecting his broad comedy characters with the story, as Dogberry, for example, is permitted to influence events in "Much Ado." But for the most part his comedy figures represent only themselves, and even Dogberry stands in no relation to any idea in the play. In Molière the web of the action is of closer tissue, and it will be discovered that all his fun makers and the unconscious sources of the fun illustrate some special aspects of the problem he is concerned with. They are all an integral part of the comic idea.

Shakespeare's comedy is immortal, his method of comedy died with him. We say occasionally of George Eliot, more frequently of Thomas Hardy, that in their work some character or group of characters is Shakespearean. The reference is always to rustic types whose humours are elemental. Shakespeare's delineation of these types is rich in comic

observation and in effect, but of modern examples of this broad realism I should be inclined to say that they are more English than Shakespearean. They lie within the humours of the race.

Shakespeare and Molière are alike in this that they are both inimitable. The distinction of Molière is that he devised a method in comedy which still imposes itself as a law upon the thoughtful dramatists of the modern world.

PELHAM EDGAR